

frank bowling



*Frank Bowling interviewed by Robert Doty, New York,
Sept. 14, 1971.*

What iconography is significant for you?

The iconography of my work, until recently, was almost entirely to do with my childhood. When I began to be bothered by the paintings I was doing as a student, I tried to make a film that would get rid of the whole business of iconography once and for all. Before the film, the things I made were based on the faces and dress, or undress, of various ethnic types in Guyana. I tried working with still life objects and attempting to fuse the shapes of the map of Guyana with Africa; all this before I went to the Royal College of Art in London in 1959. That summer, Carel Weight, professor of painting at the College, made some remarks about my having to make my mind up about what kind of painter I wanted to be, abstract or figurative. What he said pushed me then to dealing with the school situation. My paintings became tremendously involved with beggars, human wastage through conflict, etc., and the landscape I knew as a child. A lot of this was I as a boy trying to fill in the gaps of bad memory. I used my mother's store as a window out of which I looked at the world. After leaving London to live in New York, I broke loose and began to get much more involved in pure painting, trying to fuse the kinds of things I was interested in with what could actually be upheld viably in a painting situation. I eventually found the most comfortable way of actually dealing with paint and structures from the outside by leaning on ready-made shapes and photographs. The gradual turnover of rejecting what was too complicated led me to remove much of it entirely into another medium.

What control do you exercise over color?

Color for me is very personal, even though I set out intentionally, like everything else I do with my work, with a ready-made structure. The book says red is to green at a certain ratio and I'm very conscious of that. But, I think the very basic drive which keeps me constant, is the fact that I need to push the ideas as found over the edge where it happens for me; that is, on my

painted surface. I feel it's reinvigorated and new. So, color is a sense of a very personal dilemma. I'm adjusting color almost entirely thorough emotional leads. Color plays an enormous part in my work, if not the most important part.

What antecedents are important to you?

I think what made me, what fed my enthusiasm and gave me courage to sustain myself painting in the face of a lot of family opposition, was the example of people like Goya. At the time I started painting, van Gogh was a very fashionable figure, and his whole commitment fascinated me. In technical problems, I leaned very heavily on Rembrandt when I was a student. I was very involved in the British Museum and the African collection there. Working as a student in London, I was inspired by realist painting, the Euston Road School of painters and Cezanne. I was very attached to the National Gallery where I became very involved in the Renaissance and history painting, Poussin for instance. I'm still fascinated by so-called Traditional African art. But I think the most immediate antecedents are the artists here in New York and the drive and energy they have toward creating a new or personal view. I think meeting someone like Jasper Johns made an enormous contribution to my development after 1965, when I was very much anti-influence. For instance, as a student and after I left the Royal College, I had Francis Bacon hanging around my neck like a millstone, so I was really into rejecting influences, as such. I met Jasper Johns and he was instrumental in making me feel the situation of being an artist was not just a cul-de-sac, and that one was free to do what one liked. I was living at the Hotel Chelsea at the time and he came to visit me. I was freely drawing in map shapes at the time and was very shy about showing the work; he put me at ease by saying he didn't own maps, that I shouldn't think twice about going out and buying maps, cutting them up and putting them together again. This attitude influenced me enormously. Shortly after, I went to Long Island and stayed with Larry Rivers. He showed me how to use an epiadioscope, after which I made my first tracings of the map of South America, which was

holding sway over my imagination after Guyana and Africa. From then on I used readymades or tracings.

The use of the map suggests a microcosm. Do you seek such concepts?

The question refers to some kind of 18th-century idea of a little (small) man in a little situation, very mechanical and small in scale; the world of black art. I don't believe, as a painter, in the idea of black art; but it's obvious the black experience is universal. The more I think about it the more I feel . . . yes, and no because obviously, in a way the whole idea of a microcosm as opposed to a macrocosm is something that I'm about in this sort of harrassing situation. Yet, I felt reticent about committing myself totally to the idea; simply because over and above everything else, I feel very political about a lot of issues, and I'm certainly political about what it means to be an artist, an artist who happens to be black, as such, and I think a lot of the things which have gone down makes what I'm doing a reflection of a much wider spectrum. In this sense I would agree.

Do you deliberately strive for ambiguity in your work?

Yes! I think that this is a very prime concern of mine. I think that in some sort of terrible way, the more you watch the less you see. It's kind of a guiding principle . . . but it works the other way in painting. When you see a thing (a painting) you don't realise how much is there, because it's part of the trickery of what one is doing. I think paint as material opposes the rigidity of canvas and its supports in such a way that it tends to undermine the entire thing, so that one has to sustain the efficacy of canvas in his contradictory medium. The unknowable causation, the chance, which in itself sets up some kind of ambiguous, sort of tricky situation, in the best moments although no one actually reaches that stage. You can't have total ambiguity. The ambiguous is *elusive!* I think that is the most marvelous state for the painting, where the thing really is giving out a certain kind of information, and withholding so much, that it fascinates you. And I feel that's an important aspect of the

attempt to be a painter, or what being a painter is about . . . being totally involved in the ambiguous.

The word, "fascination," suggests that you are very concerned with human response to your work. What values are of real concern to you?

I'm very concerned about intellectual freedom, fair play, some kind of moral standards of justice, etc. But when I think of painting and try to harness it with all this stuff I think it sounds boring along side the vitality of painting. I think what can be excused or dismissed, as old-fashioned, mundane and boring, forces one to have certain standards by which as an artist and a person, to live . . . One is forced to be a certain kind of political individual. I think that rejecting good-will is probably one of the most pernicious aspects of existence in the 70's. But it's very evident that people are still awfully cynical or perhaps *more* cynical. Cynicism is very fashionable, and this forces one to take a stand, if one is really a concerned person, against indifference of this kind, because I often think that the advocacy of destruction without an alternative structure is really a kind of anti-life approach. For instance dropping out as protest became high fashion, a kind of kitsch high fashion, and one was forced then to seek an alternative. The alternative was, and still is, action. I think one cannot live without some kind of canon such as put-up or shut-up. I mean one is either going to do the thing and prove, not just simply to oneself and one's peers, but to the vast spectrum of concerned parties that this stoutness one is claiming has a solid underbelly on which to rest. I think if one can separate some of the things which sound old-fashioned and boring, one actually needs to be pro-life, and cope; literally to tackle the problems and try to solve them. Of course cut away debris. Of course destroy what's bad. If this is a rat-infested neighborhood, set it alight. I agree about all these things. But one must have an alternative plan because I really do think there are guidelines even if they do actually come under the old-fashioned and outmoded bag for there aren't any others upon which one can particularly pounce and say: *that's it!*



Frank Bowling

Born at Bartica Essequibo, Guyana, South America, 1935.

Studied Slade School of Fine Arts, London University; Royal College of Art, London, (graduated 1962); travelling scholarship to the Caribbean and South America, 1962.

Taught at Cooper Union, Columbia University, Rutgers University, and Massachusetts College of Art, 1967-1971, Guggenheim Fellowship, 1967.

Artist in Residence, Critics Choice Program, New York State Council on the Arts, 1968-1969.

One-Man Exhibitions:

Grabowski Gallery, 1962, 1963

Terry Dintenfass Gallery, 1966

Group Exhibitions:

Commonwealth Institute, Edinburgh, Commonwealth Art

Richard Demarco Gallery, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Festival

Tate Gallery, London, London Group

RBA Gallery, London, Young Commonwealth Artists

RBA Gallery, London, Young Contemporaries

Art Gallery, State University of New York at Stonybrook, 5 + 1

Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, *Afro-American Artists Boston-New York*

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, *Contemporary Black Artists in America*

Permanent Collections

180 Beacon Collection of Contemporary Art, Boston

British Arts Council, London

Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, London

Contemporary Art Society, London

Tate Gallery, London

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Catalogue

1. *Fani Ciotti*. 1971. 111 x 216
2. *Polish Rebecca*. 1971. 108 x 132 (cover)
3. *Texas Louise*. 1971. 111 x 264
4. *Untitled I*. 1971. 111 x 144
5. *Untitled II*. 1971. 111 x 120
6. *Untitled III*. 1971. 111 x 90

All works are acrylic on canvas and are lent by the artist.

All dimensions are in inches, height preceding width.

November 4-December 6, 1971

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